

Outstanding Women

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Mrs. T. Eaton

Her life is worth knowing because of the character she achieved in the work that she did. There will be none else like her.

Margaret Beattie was born on March 8, 1842, in the City of Toronto. She was the oldest daughter of a Toronto merchant, Joseph Beattie and his wife, Elizabeth Tilt. A few years after her birth, the Beatties moved to Eastwood, near Woodstock, where Margaret spent her childhood and received her education.

As a child, Margaret was praised for her "capability, energy, and originality"². Even during her youth, it was said of her, "Whatever Margaret Beattie does, she does well!"³ She was an excellent horsewoman and she often

Margaret Beattie,
age 19



received first prize for her baking and needlework at local fairs.

In 1861, while visiting a friend in St. Marys, Margaret met Timothy Eaton, who was a young Irish merchant in the town. "Something warned me that this young man was likely to be dangerous", she said. "When he approached me, I always crossed the road, to avoid meeting him."⁴ But Timothy eventually won her affections and a year later they were married.

During their seven-year stay in St. Marys Mrs. Eaton was kept busy raising their three children and helping Timothy in his store. Women of the community admired Mrs. Eaton's skill at designing bonnets for him to sell in the store. This was only her first step towards involvement in the business world.



T. Eaton's first store



No. 3. Straw hats, trimmed with tips, os prey and ribbon velvet, \$3.00 to 4.50.



No. 6. Black straw or chip hats, trimmed with black tips and ribbon, \$3.00 to 5.00.



No. 10. Straw or Leghorn hats, trimmed with silk coque feathers and jet or steel buckle, \$3.00 to 5.00.



No. 4. Straw hats, trimmed with ribbon and straw trimming, \$2.00 to 3.00



No. 7. Fancy straw sailor hats, trimmed with satin ribbon and quills, \$1.50 to 2.50.



No. 11. Straw hats, trimmed with ribbon, jet pins and tips, \$3.00 to 5.00.



No. 5. Fancy straw or chip hats, with pompons, osprey and ribbon, \$2.50 to 3.50.



No. 9. Straw walking hats, fancy edge, trimmed with ribbon and Prince of Wales plumes, \$2.50 to 4.00.



No. 12. Misses' straw hats, trimmed with ribbon and tips, \$3.00 to 4.50.

From every part of this vast Dominion there keeps a-coming by mail orders for this thing and that. We supply thousands of families in just such a way. Why not you?

In 1869, on the advice of Mrs. Eaton, Timothy moved his family to Toronto. They hoped that their business would grow with the larger market that Toronto had to offer. In Toronto, Mrs. Eaton became even more involved with her husband's business. "She was unofficially known as the welfare officer of the staff, and no clerk was ever ill that she did not visit."⁵ The staff recognized her sympathy and kindness as genuine. "She was affectionately known as 'mother' among all the directors and executives; she called them all by first names."⁶ Her interest in the store was often very practical, and her "eye for business" produced many changes in the women's department. She was instrumental in having mirrors provided for customers to view the garment that they wished to purchase. Every day, she rode to the store to pick up her husband and to survey the store and its contents. In this way she was always familiar with the "goings on" of her husband's business. "Her influence in the store and business was immeasurable and Mr. Eaton was always the first to acknowledge it."⁷ He consulted his wife before making any important decisions and always valued her judgement highly. When the firm became an incorporated company in 1891, Mrs. Eaton was on the Board of Directors and fulfilled her duties on the Board for a number of years.

Mrs. Eaton was a dynamic force behind the development of the Eaton's store, but her home was her true domain. Throughout her life, she retained Victorian ideals concerning her home and family. For many people, Mrs. Eaton's family represented the family as the foundation of society that it was meant to be. She maintained only one standard around which her life was modelled: "the best" must prevail.⁸ Mrs. Eaton was a gracious, sincere, and down-to-earth woman, who never showed any signs of conceit. The following lines were carved above the door of the Eatons' Oakville residence:

The lintel low enough to keep out pomp and pride,
The threshold high enough to turn deceit aside,
The doorbands strong enough from robbers to defend,
The door will open at a touch, to every friend.⁹

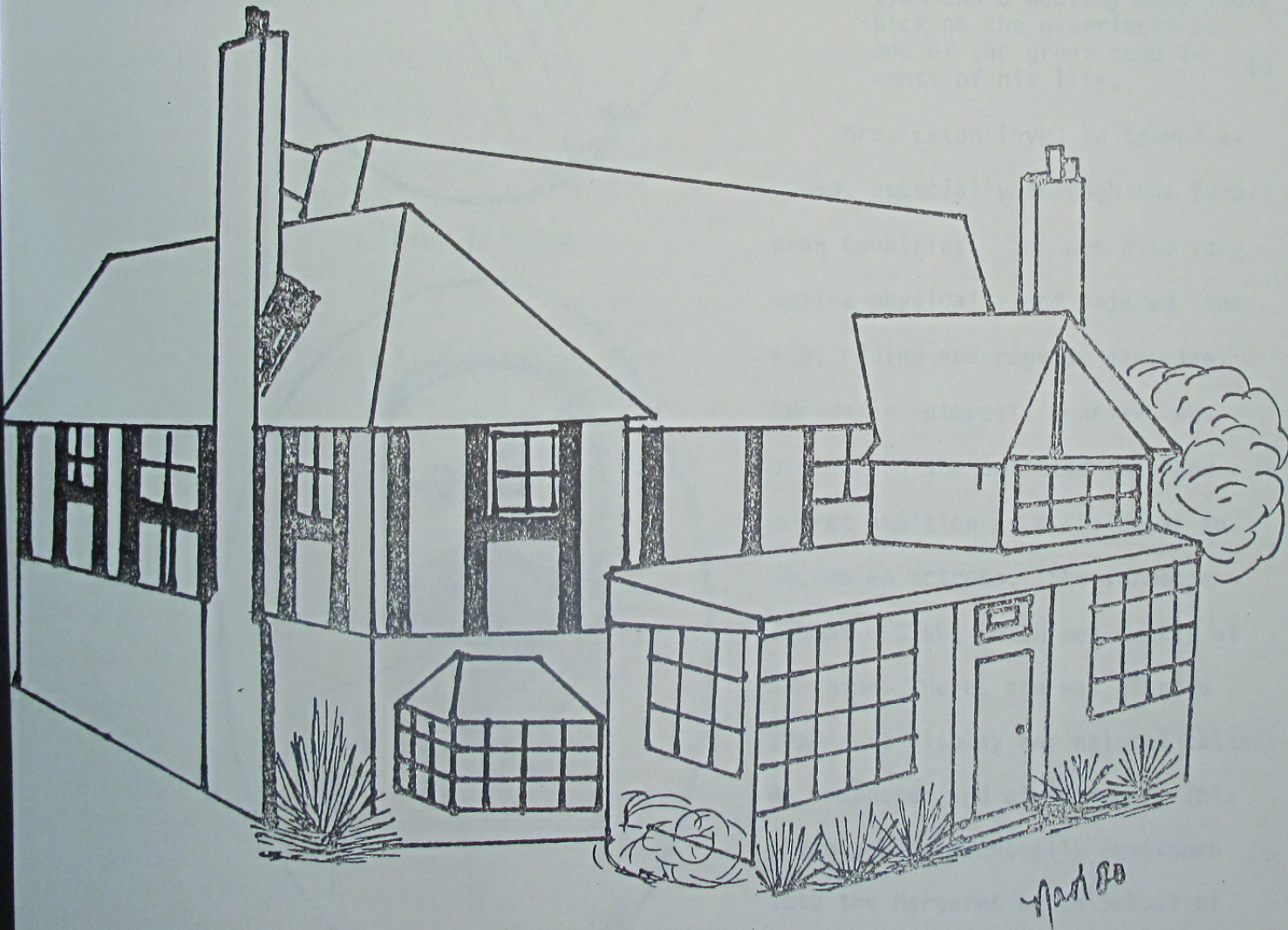
Her hospitality, portrayed in these lines, is illustrated by the following story:

A youth was sent up from the store to hang blinds and curtains in the new Eaton home on Lowther Avenue. At 12 o'clock he was going out to lunch when he met Mrs. Eaton.

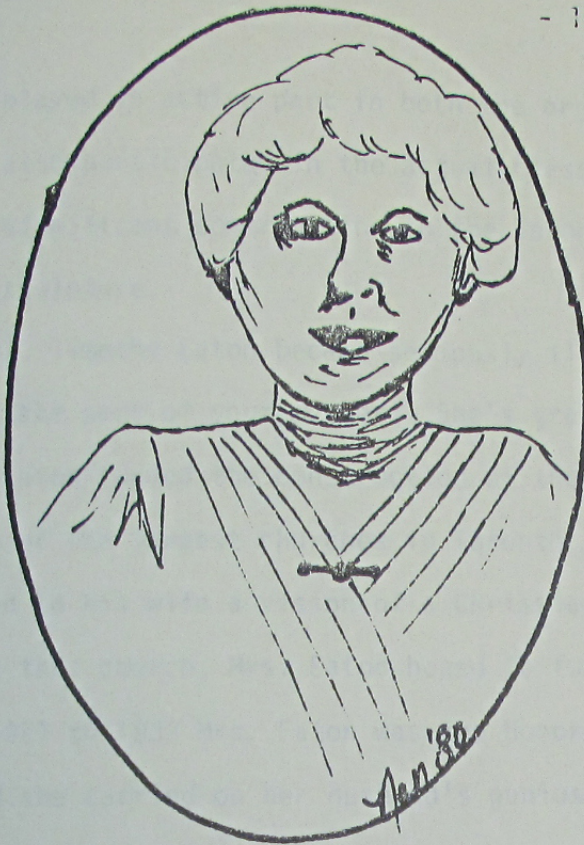
"Where are you going?" she asked.

"To get my lunch," he said.

"You just stay here and have dinner with us."



The Eatons' Oakville residence



Mrs. T. Eaton



Mr. T. Eaton

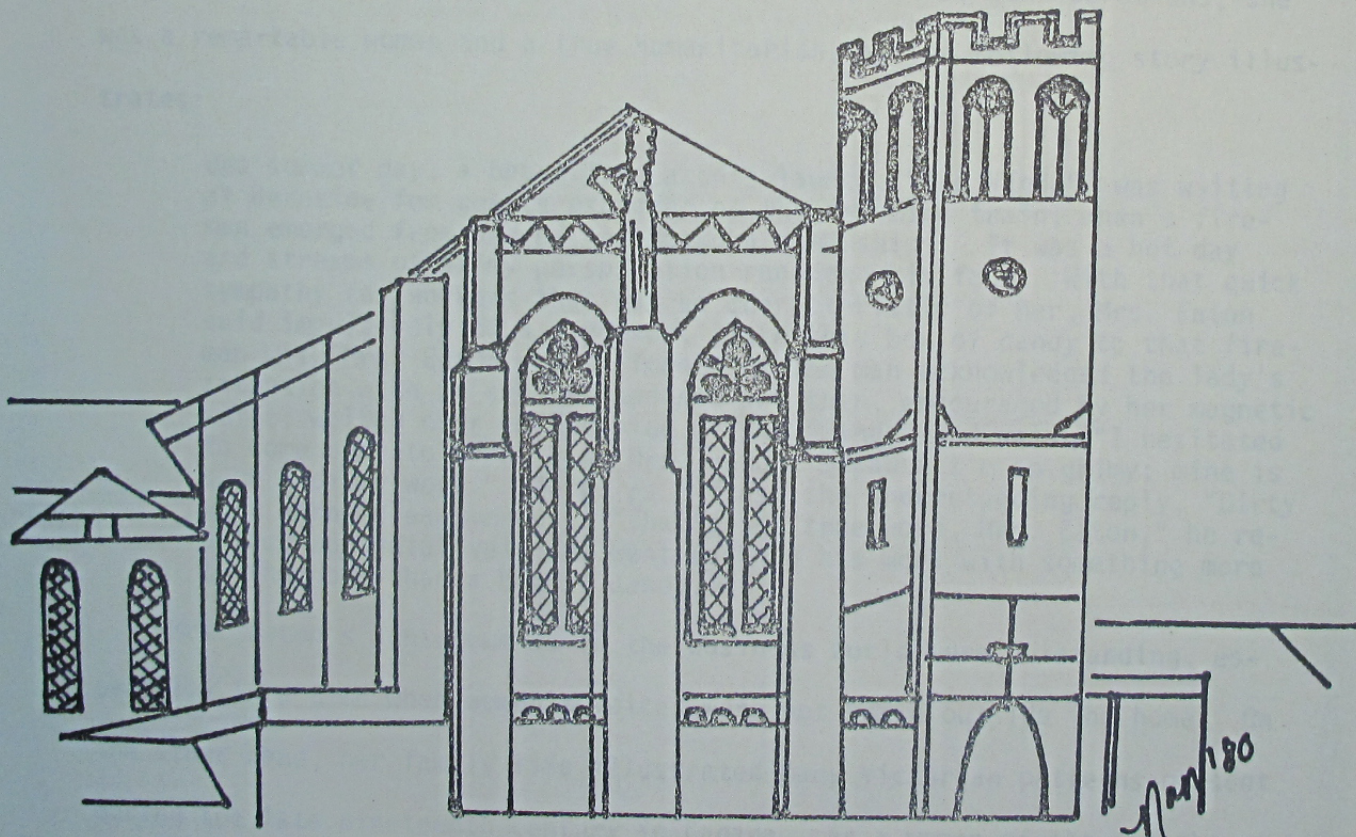
And he stayed; for when Mrs. Eaton wanted anything, she usually got it. The boy was placed next to Mr. Eaton in the place of honour. He was given new-laid eggs in a season when new-laid eggs were scarce, the same as Mr. Eaton. He was made an honoured guest for every day of the week on which he worked at the job. Today, that boy, though now in a high position and a wealthy man, looks back on the experience as one of the great compliments of his life. 10

Mrs. Eaton loved to travel abroad, especially through the European countries. She was also very active physically and enjoyed fencing, riding and regular exercise. Her major interest, however, was acting and she admitted that her secret ambition as a child was to become an actress. She formed a Dramatic Club, which met weekly at her home. Here, she was given a chance to display her natural talents as a speaker and an actress. This organization eventually developed into the Margaret Eaton School of Literature and Expression in 1905.

Mrs. Eaton played an active part in both the organization of the school and also participated in the actual classes. As a lover of the arts, she made a significant contribution to the Toronto Art Gallery by donating a valuable sculpture.

In 1907, Timothy Eaton became seriously ill. On his death bed, he said, "Children, take care of your mother. She's grand."¹¹ In memory of her husband, Mrs. Eaton funded the construction of the massive Timothy Eaton Memorial Church, one of the largest churches in Toronto. In his later years, Mr. Eaton had confided to his wife a vision of a Christian church as it should function. In building this church, Mrs. Eaton hoped to fulfill his vision.

From 1921 to 1933 Mrs. Eaton was the Honorary President of the Eaton Company and she carried on her husband's genius even after his death.



The Timothy Eaton Memorial Church

Mrs. Eaton never lost her sincerity and zest for life. In 1920, at the age of 78, she joyously accompanied her son, Sir John Eaton, in an airplane flight over the Muskoka lakes. The pilot on this trip was her granddaughter's husband, Col. William Bishop, V.C., the renowned war ace. "Mother," said Sir John after the landing, "I was never so proud of you as at this moment--seventy-eight and still a good sport."¹²

People often said of her that she was "a notable mother and a woman of high distinction" in recognition of her qualities as a mother and her position as the wife of a renowned and successful businessman. However, this description of her is limiting and unfair because it fails to appreciate that she was exceptional in her own right. Outside of all other considerations, she was a remarkable woman and a true humanitarian, as the following story illustrates:

One summer day, a beautiful Eaton's launch, "The Wanda", was waiting at Burnside for guests expected on the incoming train, when a fireman emerged from one of the Muskoka steamships. It was a hot day and streams of grimy perspiration ran down his face. With that quick sympathy for workers that was so characteristic of her, Mrs. Eaton said impulsively to a grandson, "Take this box of candy to that fireman with Mrs. Eaton's compliments." The man acknowledged the lady's attention with an embarrassed nod and then, encouraged by her magnetic smile, walked over to the side of the "Wanda" and said, "I hesitated to come over to thank you, Mrs. Eaton, because I'm so grimy; mine is such a dirty work." Quick as a flash the understanding reply, "Dirty work earns clean money." "That's the true word, Mrs. Eaton," he replied, appreciatively and went back to his work with something more to the good than a box of candy.¹³

Mrs. Eaton's achievements in the business world were outstanding, especially in a time when women's voices were not heard outside the home. On the other hand, her family life illustrated many Victorian patterns present during the late nineteenth century in Canada. As a woman of the era she stood firmly behind her husband but she did not play a subservient role as many women did. "Had Timothy Eaton not chosen Margaret Beattie he might

Monday, Mar 20 1933
Edmonton, Alta Journal

THE FUNERAL

Will Take Place in Toronto
Tomorrow Afternoon

— OF —

MRS. TIMOTHY EATON

Widow of the Late Timothy Eaton

Founder of

THE T. EATON COMPANY, LIMITED

To Honour the Memory
Of This Revered Lady

THE STORE WILL CLOSE AT ONE P.M.
TOMORROW, TUESDAY

*And Will Remain Closed Throughout the
Afternoon*

have been successful: it is doubtful if he would have been both enormously successful and constantly happy."¹⁴ On March 18, 1933, Margaret Eaton died at the age of 91.

Footnotes

- 1 The Toronto Star, Monday, March 20, 1933
- 2 Jessie Alexander Roberts, A Biography of Mrs. T. Eaton. At the Eaton's Archives, Toronto.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 The Toronto Star, Monday, March 20, 1933
- 5 The Daily Sentinel-Review, November 17, 1962
- 6 The Toronto Star, Monday, March 20, 1933
- 7 The Golden Jubilee, 1869-1919 of the T. Eaton Co. Ltd. (Toronto, 1919)
- 8 The Toronto Star, March 20, 1933
- 9 The Hamilton Herald, March 20, 1933
- 10 The Toronto Star, March 20, 1933
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 The Hamilton Herald, March 20, 1933
- 13 The Toronto Star, March 20, 1933
- 14 Roberts, A Biography of Mrs. T. Eaton.
- 15 The Toronto Star, March 20, 1933

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The Story of a Store: The History of Eaton's from 1869. Canada: The T. Eaton Company Limited, 1947.

Eaton family scrapbooks, at the Eaton's Archives, Toronto.

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